
WOMEN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF NATTARMANGLAM VILLAGE PANCHAYAT IN TAMILNADU, INDIA

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Abstract: Women in India are provided with 33% reservation in the three tier system of the local governance by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1993) as part of the inclusive policy of the Government of India. Despite this constitutional provision, women face numerous obstacles to ascertain their rights and execute their mandatory powers as panchayat presidents. Facts indicate that legislative provision alone cannot bring success to the policy of empowering women through their inclusion in governance. In practice, caste, class and gender disparity play a crucial role in hindering the functioning of the elected women representatives. In spite of these setbacks, a few of them have succeeded in discharging their duties as presidents of the Panchayat efficiently. In this backdrop, the paper uses the social capital approach to understand how women in Nattarmangalam village in Tamil Nadu have negotiated the dynamics of caste, class and gender and succeeded in asserting themselves. Using empirical and qualitative data, the present work brings out the unique experience of the All-Women Panchayat in Tamil Nadu. It seeks to analyse how women have empowered themselves and others from a feminist perspective and documents the same for proactive policy and action.

Key words: inclusive policy, social capital, feminist perspective.

Introduction: As one enters the Nattarmangalam village in Kattumannarkoil taluk in Cuddalore district in Tamil Nadu, the green coloured sign board announces the name of the village and also the name of the head Ms. Sudha Manirathinem M. A., B. Ed. a rarity, given the fact that she hails from the Dalit community which had faced centuries- long social exclusion. The 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution envisaged the political empowerment of women at the grassroots level by providing 33% reservation for women in the three tier system of local government. Jayal (2006, 21) observes that any assessment of women's participation in the Panchayat Raj Institutions must take cognizance of two contrary tendencies, namely, the enabling character of the constitutional provisions, facilitating participation through inclusion on the one hand and a plenitude of constraints that inhibit participation through exclusionary practices, both social and institutional, on the other. Scholars (Mangubai, Irudhyam and Sydenham, 2009) have also pointed out the obstacles faced especially by Dalit women in realizing the core objectives of the Panchayat Raj Institutions due to caste, class and gender discrimination. In their words: "(P)olitical participation cannot be viewed in isolation: efforts to realise other enabling rights – especially the rights to education and information, to free employment, alongside the right to equality within the family and in society – must be integrated with efforts to ensure Dalit women's enjoyment of their right to political participation" (Mangubai et al, 2009, 14). In spite of the obstacles which continue to stagger the participation of women especially from the Dalit community in the Panchayat Raj Institutions, the Nattarmangalam village Panchayat, an all women Panchayat is an exception to the

general condition of handicaps faced by Dalit women. Palanivelraja and Manirathinem (2013) have highlighted the programmes of Nattarmangalam panchayat in the backdrop of the paradigm of sustainable living communities. The functioning of this village panchayat under the capable leadership of Ms. Sudha Manirathinem, an empowered Dalit woman, calls for an analysis as to what has made it possible for her to achieve this proven leadership. Using empirical and qualitative data, the present work employs the social capital approach to understand how women in Nattarmangalam village in Tamilnadu have negotiated the dynamics of caste, class and gender and succeeded in providing community leadership in a rural society.

The first part of this article elaborates the concept of social capital and explains the different forms of social capital that impact the lives of people in different social contexts. The second part of this paper analyzes these theoretical premises through a case study of Nattarmangalam village panchayat in Tamil Nadu and explores how by making use of dynamic combinations of social capital, women have brought out positive changes in their social and material environment. In the final section conclusions are drawn based on the efficiency of women's agency in utilizing the social capital to establish their political power at the micro level. This section also puts forward suggestions as to how this model of panchayat strategy can be utilized for promoting people centered democracy.

Social capital refers to the networks, and norms that enable people to act collectively. Proponents of social capital theory see it as an important link in understanding democratic governance, and economic development. The concept of social capital, since its

appearance in the early twentieth century, attempted to capture the influence of intangible resources linked to the sociality of individuals. In the words of Lyda J. Hanifan, who introduced the concept, "I do not refer to real estate, or to personal property or cold cash, but rather to that in life that tends to make this tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit, the rural community" (Hanifan 1916, 130). Considerable literature has accrued on the concept of Social Capital over the decades from economic, sociological, political, development and management perspectives (Bourdieu 1980; Coleman 1988; Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993; Knack and Keefer 1997; Dasgupta and Serageldin 1999; Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Dasgupta 2005). For the purpose of this paper the References point is the concept of social capital developed and proposed by Fabio Sabatini (2006). In his words, social capital, that is identified with social networks, is composed by "informal networks of strong families ties (bonding social capital), informal networks of weak bridging ties connecting friends and acquaintances (bridging social capital), formal networks connecting members of voluntary organizations (linking social capital) and formal networks of activists in political parties " (Sabatini 2006, 22). The distinction between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital has brought the analysis of social capital, a step further.

Social Capital holds people together and gives them a sense of belonging in an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world. It is not readily available but is rather developed in our relationships, through doing things for one another and is accumulated in the trust that we develop in one another. It helps in bonding with others in a fragmented social life, in the bridging of communities to places and contacts beyond their immediate environment and in the linking of people to formal structures and agencies that may help them with opportunities for education or employment. It is important to make a distinction between the different forms of social capital, and to understand that social capital may either open or limit opportunities.

While bonding social capital is based on exclusive solidarity between "people like us," the bridging form of social capital refers to more inclusive solidarity between people of different backgrounds. Bonding social capital is the first step in the process of creating social capital, but it is the bridging form of social capital that is needed in democratic governance, and economic progress. The linking form of social capital, which has gained the attention of scholars of late, is the accumulation of linking ties with formal institutions, and individuals in positions of power.

The underlying idea is that "there is an optimal dynamic balance of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, which simultaneously facilitates democratic governance, economic efficiency, and widely-dispersed human welfare, capabilities, and functioning" (Szreter 2002, 580).

Need for the study: Inclusion of women in local governance has a direct relationship with women's empowerment as it increases their capacity to participate in the decision making process as well as community management of resources. However the involvement and agency of grassroots women in bringing about change is a neglected aspect of development literature. There is a paucity of literature on documenting grassroots women's political leadership and its impact on society. Research, documentation and dissemination of successful experiences of grassroots women in the field of local governance are needed to review, reform and enhance the performance of Panchayat Raj Institutions in the contemporary scenario especially in the context of social capitalist approach to economic development. The aim of the present study is to focus on the Nattarmangalam village panchayat which is an All Women Panchayat (AWP) in Tamil Nadu as a case study and a model for the use of bridging and linking social capital in bringing about change. Village panchayat is the micro level unit of local government having elected representatives or Panchayat Council (PC) members. Among the three tiers (at the village, taluk and district levels) village panchayats plays a major role in view of the wide variety of civic functions and collection of taxes from the villages. To establish a village panchayat the voting population of the village should be at least 500 people of voting age. A village panchayat consists a minimum of 7 and maximum of 17 members, elected from the wards of the village in which one-eighth of seats are reserved for female candidates.

Methodology: An empirical study was conducted in Nattarmangalam. Qualitative and feminist research techniques have been used in eliciting information. Feminism recognises the ability of women to identify new or better ways of understanding their situation which in turn leads to their being able to identify ways to change and improve their situation. Techniques used in feminist research are concerned to present women's perspective in the normal ways women communicate, or involve sources accessible to women. These normal ways are the ones with which women feel most comfortable and thus empowered to speak. Conversation, group discussions, story-telling, and participant/observation (participants-as-observers) are used in this research which is also supported by one to one interviews, and analysis of secondary materials. The data analysis throws light on how different forms of social capital

capacitated women’s agency. Basic to feminist research method is that all research is essentially valuedriven and always results in some kind of new action or practice, and consequently examines its own values and contribution to altering (or perpetuating) existing situations.

Study area Nattarmangalam village panchayat in Kattumannarkoil Taluk of Cuddalore District is 3.1km , 60.3 km and 213 km from its Taluk main town Kattumannarkoil, District headquarters Cuddalore and state capital Chennai respectively. The following table gives the demographic profile of the village as per the census of 2011.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Nattarmangalam

Particulars	Total	Male	Female
Total no. of houses	575	-	-
Child(o-6)	241	120	121
Schedule Caste	1,341	667	674
Schedule Tribe	0	0	0
Literacy	76.02%	82.91%	69.23%
Total Workers	1,062	633	429
Main Workers	488	0	0
Marginal Workers	574	294	280

Source:

<http://www.census2011.co.in/data/village/636995-nattarmangalam-tamil-nadu.html>

Except for a few families among the Dalits who have converted to Christianity, the whole village houses a population of majority Hindus. The Panchayat Council being an All Women Panchayat, the members are united on the gender and religious axis.

Bonding, bridging and linking forms social capital at work: When the local body election was called for in 2011 women in Nattarmangalam decided to build up solidarity among themselves to choose the appropriate person to lead them in local governance. Caste and class identity was set aside and women chose to promote the gender identity to

capture power through strengthening their bonding capital. The village had been an active ground for Self Help Group (SHG) women for the past decade and more. Their past experiences showed that due to inter-caste rivalry none of the government welfare schemes was implemented and this time through consecutive discussions they came to the consensus to elect an educated and informed candidate and specifically a female candidate with accessibility. Being the holder of a post graduate in History and a bachelor degree in teaching, Ms. Sudha’s name was unanimously proposed by women to contest in the village panchayat election for the post of Panchayat President. She was already known as a reputed teacher in the village for the past ten years, committed to the cause of youth education. Her father-in-law and husband are economically well grounded and had a strong political connectivity with the ruling party in centre. When Sudha was approached by SHG women leaders, a suggestion came up that it can be an All Women Panchayat for Sudha to work effectively and to avoid caste rivalry within the village (Discussion with PC members on November, 20, 2015). It was well received by the Self Help Groups (360 women from 23 SHGs). Based on their request Sudha resigned her teaching position in a private school and filed her nomination. She was elected unopposed to the post of the President of the Panchayat Council. PC members were also unanimously elected based on selective criteria. After repeated group discussions, women in Nattarmangalam fixed a few criteria irrespective of caste and class, such as less household responsibilities, communication skills and mobility (freedom to move around) of the individuals to nominate appropriate ward members for the AWP. The collective decision of women with the consent of village elders an unopposed All Women Panchayat emerged in 2011. The following table gives the profile of the PC members:

Table 2: Profile of Ward Members of the Nattarmangalam Panchayat Council

Name	Age	Community	Education	Occupation	Monthly Income	Occupation of Spouse	Monthly Income of Spouse	Family Income (Appx. Amount in Rs.)
Jeeva	38	OC	V std.	Handloom Weaving	3,000	Land Owner	7,000	10,000
Anjali Devi	40	SC	IV std.	Teashop	4,000	Tailor	6,000	10,000
Lakshya Veeramani	38	SC	X std.	Home maker	Nil.	Teacher	25,000	25,000
Visalatchi	60	OC	VIII std.	Handloom Weaving	5,000	Widow	Nil	5,000

Vembu	45	OC	IV std.	Home maker	Nil.	Land Owner	12,000	12,000
Tamilarasi	30	SC	XII std.	Home maker	Nil.	Data Entry Operator	10,000	10,000
Radha	45	OC	illiterate	Milk Vendor	5,000	Driver	5,000	10,000
Muthu Lakshmi	37	SC	VIII std.	Betel Vendor	3,000	Betel Vendor	5,000	8,000
Kannagi	40	SC	illiterate	Fish Vendor	3,000	Fish Vendor	6,000	9,000
Sudha	45	SC	M.A, B.ED	School Correspondent	25,000	Building Promoter	25,000	50,000

Source: One to one interview with ward members during November, 17 – 20, 2015

Once elected, women have initiated many development schemes for the welfare of the people in general. The village has achieved environmental sustainability by providing a protected water supply (six water tanks), individual household toilets, underground drainage system, sewage treatment plant and a solid waste management facility. In order to sustain the cleanliness in the panchayat two males and two females were employed as 'Environment protection guards.' In order to make the panchayat a hut-free village panchayat, 361 huts were replaced under the Rajiv Gandhi Awas Yojana. The Panchayat President, Ms. Sudha has utilized the central and state government schemes under the Indra Awas Yojana, Pasumaiveedu and the 'Thane storm rehabilitation' fund to construct houses for the villagers (Interview with Ms. Sudha on November 20, 2015) In this process the AWP gained the trust and cooperation of the traditional village elders, networked with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and government agencies and has developed and utilized a strong bridging social capital.

Gram Sabha (GS) is a forum where all the voters of the concerned panchayat have the right to participate and audit the panchayat activities. GS meetings are well knit with bonding social capital (women's solidarity) bridging social capital (networking with men from different social groups) and linking social capital (support from bureaucrats representing the government) Once in a quarter on specific days (Jan 26th, May 1st, Aug 15th and October 2nd) GS meetings are held all over India. In Nattarmangalam due to the bonding social capital women are now regularly participating in the GS meetings and learning how to get their entitlements through government schemes. Elders and youth from other social groups too are also actively participating. The beneficiaries list is prepared with the consent of people present. Budget details are discussed and the priority in development activities is finalized. Two District Collectors participated in Gram Sabha meetings and the traditional elite who continue to hold economic and social status and power also make it a policy to sit with the people and participate in discussions. This

was perceived by all PC members as a remarkable achievement since in earlier panchayats participation in Gram Sabha meetings was scanty due to caste rivalry (Discussion with ward members during November 17 to 20, 2015). More importantly, the women's groups took a stand against the evils of alcoholism, especially the constant eve teasing complaints from school going girl children. Women acted as a pressure group and with the support of the village males closed the liquor shop which was functioning nearer to bus stop. Because of the bonding capital (as women) and the bridging capital (help extended by men) women realized their bargaining power which boosted their self confidence to combat social evils. By building up network with other stakeholders like bureaucrats, district authorities and NGO women enhanced the linking social capital.

Muir (2011) measured linking social capital as connections with service agencies, volunteer agencies, and politicians, i.e. those with authority, influence, information, and power. Successful governance at the local level is made possible through the linking and networking of NGOs, bureaucrats and district authorities and the panchayat council. In Nattarmangalam through the intervention of an NGO namely Rural Education and Action for Liberation in short REAL (<http://realvpm.org>), twenty three SHGs with 360 women are functioning for more than fifteen years. The SHGs have acted as a spring board for the Nattarmangalam AWP to launch several schemes to promote livelihood security through various government schemes (Discussion with SHG groups during October 6 - 9, 2015). Nattarmangalam was as one among fifty five village panchayats selected by the Government of Tamil Nadu for the implementation of the Pudhu Vaazhvu Thittam, an empowerment and poverty alleviation project introduced by the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department of the Government of Tamilnadu with World Bank assistance in 2008. Under this scheme the Nattarmangalam Panchayat was made the headquarters for 16 village panchayats. More than hundred representatives from select panchayats

participated in skill trainings programmes under Pudhu Vaazhvu Thittam, implemented by the state government. The training programme encouraged women to become entrepreneurs and also to market their products. For instance, women, after getting the necessary skills in fitting toilet basins, initiated toilet construction in their villages. Recognizing their skills, they were asked to make toilet basins for all the 13 unions panchayats in Cuddalore district. It is to be noted that they were well paid and that no contractor or mediator was allowed to have a role in all their economic activities (Interview with Ms.Chitra, Trainer and Ms. Jayanthi, Accountant on October 7, 2015). The Nattarmangalam PC under the leadership of Ms. Sudha has done away with intermediaries. This direct management of funds and resources has resulted in the proper outreach of government schemes to the poor and the needy and in the economic empowerment of women at the grassroots. In short the elected administration has not only achieved the participation of the maximum number of people but their economic welfare and self-reliance as well. The all-women panchayat of Nattarmangalam earned twin distinctions in 2013. It has won the "Panchayat Sashaktikaran Puraskar Award for 2012-2013" instituted by the Union Ministry of Panchayati Raj, and, its president Sudha Manirathinem bagged the "Outstanding Women Panchayat Leaders Award for 2013" instituted by the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi.



Source: <http://www.rina.in/national/smt-krishna-tirath-awards-women-panchayat-leaders/>

The Citation Award highlighted her achievement as follows: V.Sudha Manirathinem has been president of the Nattarmangalam Village 'AllWomen' Panchayat since 2011. Before becoming president of the panchayat, she worked as a school teacher, and was fully involved in social and development work in the area. With her Scheduled Caste (SC) background, she has taken some exceptionally bold steps in this General Category Panchayat. Her most notable achievements include total eradication of the use of plastic bags in the entire panchayat area and total

sanitation in the village. She mobilised voluntary contributions for this cause, and approached different philanthropic groups to raise funds for toilet construction. Out of 750 families, only three houses had toilets when she was first elected, but today all households have toilets. In addition, separate toilet facilities have been provided for men and women in common places and are maintained by self-help groups. (<http://www.issin.org/wpdc-report-2013.pdf>).

Findings:

1. PC members along with panchayat president as a team play a major role for the success of AWP. The involvement of the PC members in development activities has not only brought about their own economic enhancement but raised economic status of women at the grassroots.
2. Social visibility of women has increased and their self-esteem and confidence levels have been boosted due to their decision making role in the public arena.
3. Bureaucrats play a positive role and their contribution as a stakeholder in local governance is laudable.
4. Women SHGs acted as catalysts. Village women felt that domestic conflict and violence had come down along with asset creation, active participation in public affairs and reduction of alcoholic consumption.

Suggestions:

1. The support that women (PC members) enjoyed from the male members of the family encouraged them to experiment with innovative programmes. This freedom has helped them to build their self confidence and civic responsibility. This gender sensitivity should be disseminated to the village community.
2. By virtue of law, local panchayat is non political governance. In the absence of pressure and interference from political parties there is a high possibility for managing the panchayat's income and allocating the budget for people centered development activities. This model is replicable in other panchayats.
3. NGOs and government authorities should take the responsibility to motivate SHG leaders and members to make use of the provisions of the constitution for women's political empowerment at local level.
4. It is pertinent to educate bureaucrats about the power of Gram Sabha and its role in the decision making process, so that their participation in Gram Sabha is meaningful.

Conclusion: The Nattarmangalam village panchayat has emerged as a role model for all the local bodies in the state. The All Women Panchayat has achieved notable success in the development of the village

panchayat. Factors such as the transformative leadership of the Village Panchayat President, cooperative Panchayat Council members, supportive bureaucrats, NGOs, other social groups and women Self Help Groups in the village worked in creating a

strong base for the success of the AWP. Bonding, bridging and linking forms of social capital played a major role in their success. This process has transformed women's life and in turn is transforming their community's livelihood in a true sense.

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